One on the Aisle

President Kennedy

By Richard L. Coe

THE CLIMATE of opinion is the atmosphere in which the critic breathes.

Yesterday's dastardly crime lay in the atmosphere, unthinking, selfish, wasteful. Around us, every day, we all have heard the talk, small and mean, which created the poisonous air.

One thinks of the sneers of particular columnists, commentators, breast-beaters, of ignorance and small minds.

One thinks of those who only a few years ago were saying the Negro must not be allowed in the theaters of Washington. These were the people who expressed surprise, after the theaters were opened up, that so few Negroes attended and who exhibited blank faces when you explained to them that both economically and because of meagre education, only a few could be, or ever were, expected.

These small, unthinking thoughts yesterday came into flowering. It was such mean things as those which, added up, created the atmosphere that led to national tragedy.

One could sense the public ethic was leading to shame. How shameful one learns only now.

Civilized Observer

Among my most treasured mementos are a few green White House envelopes, in them brief, two-sentence lines written by President Kennedy after various columns I had written about the rocky road of the National Cultural Center. "Don't worry. We're going to get this done," he wrote.

These envelopes came at hurried times in his busy life. How he ever had room in his mind for this particular care was one of the wonders of this man. I have been told that he himself rewrote a wire firmed this with a laugh a few months later when again we talked of the Cultural Center.

People still say the center never will be built. This defeatist attitude is part of that unthinking, wasteful climate which allowed yesterday's tragedy. To complete the center will be one of the many things that must be done in atonement for the atmosphere that led to such a crime.

President Kennedy was a civilized man. His tastes in theater and films were proudly American. He chortled one night when he discovered I was attacking Arthur Schlesinger Jr., for the latter's praise of certain foreign films. The President's tastes were what the intellectuals might consider frivolous, but he was all for the freest expression of opinions.

Gracious Spectator

The artists who entertained at the White House these Kennedy years will never forget the graciousness with which he always led the applause and sped forward from his first-row armchair to introduce them to his honor guests.

Each one got a personal handshake and thank you and they were not then quickly shunted into the night. President and Mrs. Kennedy knew that performers are hungry after their work and for them the State Dining Room was open while nonperforming guests made their goodbyes.

This was thoughtful, understanding and civilized.

It must be faced: not all of our countrymen are so civilized. All too often our theaters, films and audiences provide the noncivilized reflection.

Will this tragedy teach us anything to expiate our meanness and our criminal waste, in the arts as in the real life they reflect?